

Three Men, Three Crosses

In the name of the Holy One who was numbered with transgressors, dear friends in Christ: In this years' series of Lenten meditations, we've focused our attention on some of the prominent characters who are associated with our Lord's passion. In so many of them, namely Judas, Peter, Pilate, Caiaphas, and Herod, we have seen sins of which we too are guilty. Or, as I said the other night, there is some of their character in each of us. And for this we need to repent and repent often – every time we see these sins emerge from our own dark hearts.

But in our last evening service we did something of a changeup. We took a look at two characters: Barabbas, the murderer and notorious criminal who was set free in exchange for our Lord; and Simon of Cyrene, the man who was compelled to carry the cross after Jesus. With them it wasn't a matter of us trying to find them and their sins in us; but rather the goal was to see ourselves in them. Barabbas is each one of us: justly condemned to die for our sins, and yet God in his mercy pardons us and sets us free while he places the punishment and death that should have been ours on his Son. Likewise with Simon: in following our Lord Jesus, at times God in his wisdom gives us a cross to bear. Such crosses are never meant for our punishment or destruction. They are always given by God for our good: to build and strengthen faith, to teach us patience, compassion, perseverance, and other Christian virtues that only come by trial and hardship. The point is that God knows what he's doing. And we are to trust him knowing that he who assigned the cross has also designated the time and place for us to put it down. We only carry a cross. It's Jesus who was nailed to one for our sakes. So Barabbas and Simon – they both represent us. We are to see ourselves in them.

And so it is also with the two men who are coming under our scrutiny this evening. They are the nameless criminals crucified with Jesus: one on his left hand, the other on his right. These two represent all people – all people who will one day appear before the judgment seat of Christ, their eternal destinies determined by what they believed about the man who was crucified between them.

What do we know about them? Very little, though we can make a few extrapolations from what we are told. They were condemned to be crucified, which tells us that weren't just your run-of-the-mill thieves, pickpockets, or burglars. The Romans didn't apply so severe a punishment to that sort of criminal. Crucifixion was reserved for high crimes like rebellion, sedition, murder, and piracy. It's commonly assumed that these two were associates or henchmen of Barabbas, the killer who was set free. We're told that he had been involved in some kind of uprising in the city in which people were murdered. It's likely that these two were also involved – but they weren't quite as notorious (nor as fortunate) as Barabbas that Pilate didn't offer either one of them up in exchange for Jesus.

Their cases had probably been tried by the Governor the afternoon before, which means they spent the night knowing in the morning they would face what is certainly one of the most ingenious and horrifying methods of execution ever devised by men. That, I suppose, was part of the torture: the mental anguish of knowing what was coming. We're familiar with how it affected the Lord Jesus as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that this cup of affliction be taken from him it were possible. He was under such immense stress that he suffered a condition called hematidrosis in which the blood vessels that supply the sweat glands enlarge and rupture causing the two fluids to mix. Thus the Gospel writers inform us "his sweat became

like great drops of blood.” If the thought of facing crucifixion was that bad for Jesus, we can’t imagine it would have been any better for the men condemned to die with him on Friday morning. It would have been a long, sleepless night full of fear and foreboding.

But at last with dawn came the sound of the guard’s feet, the jingle of keys, the heavy door to their prison cell squealing open. Handling them roughly, the guards would have brought the two out, stripped them naked, tied them to a post, and thoroughly beat them with a nasty whip called a flagellum: multiple thin strips of leather in which were embedded barbs of steel, glass, or bone. The flagellum was designed to tear the skin away and cut into flesh – but not too deeply. The goal was not to kill the victim or shorten his life in any way, but rather to increase his torment on the cross. The two were then clothed again and given their own heavy transom to carry like a yoke over their shoulders.

Upon arrival at the crucifixion site, they were offered some wine mixed with a narcotic. This was not an act of mercy. It simply made it easier to hold the prisoner still while they drove the nails through his wrists – just above that point in which the two bones in the forearm come together. Jesus declined to be drugged. It’s doubtful that the criminals followed suit. I’m sure they sought every means to alleviate their pain – even if it only lasted a short while. Having had their drink, the men were stripped naked again, laid on their backs, and nailed to the cross beams they’d carried. These beams were then lifted into place and secured upon the standing part of the crosses, which were left permanently in the ground.

It’s at this point that the cruel mechanics of crucifixion comes into play. With the weight of one’s body hanging from the outstretched arms, the diaphragm, the muscle that allows you to fill your lungs with air, is pulled up tight making it impossible to inhale. The victim of crucifixion would die of suffocation in a matter of minutes if left that way. But then, by bending his knees so that the feet were flat against the cross, they’d drive nails through the insteps. In some cases they’d turn the feet ninety degrees and drive the nails through the heels. Either way, it accomplished the same thing. By straightening his legs, the victim could take the weight off his arms and catch a breath of air. The effort was monumental and the pain involved in doing it excruciating; but that was the whole idea. It was to put the victim at war with himself, effectively making him his own torturer. You see, at this point the victim only wants to die and be done with it; but he can’t. His body’s innate instinct to breathe overpowers his mind’s will to die. As much as he wants to remain in the relaxed hanging position and suffocate, his body won’t let him do it. As long as there is strength left, he’ll push himself up for another breath; each time immediately dropping down again into the relaxed position. What this means is that it’s the muscles in the thighs – the human body’s largest and strongest – that’s keeping the person alive. And these muscles are at rest most of the time. This is why crucifixion could last for several days.

It’s also why crucifixion is such a fine illustration of the Christian life. Having come to faith in Jesus, we have two natures: the old evil flesh that loves the life of sin, and a new redeemed nature that desires to do God’s will. And part of God’s will is that we put to death in ourselves the sin nature through repentance and confession. We are at war with ourselves. But try as we might to kill sin in ourselves once and for all, we find that it always manages to catch that next breath. Thus while we remain in this life, the battle goes on. One day it will end, when this body of flesh finally dies. But until then, through daily contrition and repentance we seek to kill sin in ourselves, while we strengthen the new nature with God’s Word and Sacraments by which faith in Christ is nurtured and fed.

But let's return to the now *three* men being crucified. Each one has affixed above his head a placard naming the crimes for which he was condemned. It's there as a warning to everyone who sees: this is what happens to those who break this law. It's a powerful deterrent. Incongruously, there is no crime posted above the head of Jesus. His sign reads only "This is the King of the Jews". Pilate intends it as an insult to those who pressured him into condemning Jesus. To the Roman guards, it's a joke – as is the crown of thorns they smashed down upon his head when abusing him after his trial. With most condemned prisoners they are cold and efficient. Their job is to keep the peace in a conquered territory. They are to show Roman justice in action. It won't do to rub salt in the wounds of the general public by making fun of those condemned to die. But with Jesus it's different. He's not a real criminal. He's a Jewish holy man, one his own people have turned on. He's fair game. And so they entertain themselves by mocking and insulting him in his misery.

They're not alone in this; many in the crowd of spectators join in, especially the priests, scribes, and Pharisees who are his enemies. And the Gospel writers are clear that initially at least, both criminals also joined in mocking Jesus as they hung together on their crosses. It says a lot about the human condition that even while being tormented in the worst way imaginable, they found just a bit of pleasure in trying to make someone else's suffering worse. It's as the prophet said: The heart of man is desperately evil. Who can understand it?

But Jesus does not return their insults; not to them, nor the guards, nor the sneering crowd and religious leaders. Instead they hear him pray, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing." For many, it's something else to make sport of – Jesus so deluded that he imagines that even now, from a cross, he can intercede for others. How foolish. But for one man, the criminal on Jesus' right, it's a moment of revelation. First, it reminded him that there is a higher Judge. Pilate condemned him to death in the body for the crimes he committed; but Jesus' prayer that his heavenly Father forgive pointed to the greater judgment he would soon face. The prospect terrified him. He had been raised in the Jewish faith, but had long since given up even the pretense of practicing it. He had led a profoundly evil life and knew that he had much to answer for. But there was more: the prayer for forgiveness offered hope. Bits and pieces of Bible passages he learned in his youth came together, incomprehensible prophecies about the Messiah he had stumbled over in confusion, like the section of Isaiah we read earlier that speaks of God's suffering servant; a Savior who bears the guilt of others and who made himself an offering for sin; one who was numbered with transgressors, interceded for them, and was put to death; and yet, somehow, would live to see long life and numerous offspring, these made righteous by their knowledge of him.

This past Sunday, I spoke of the glory of the cross: the glory of God's love revealed not in bright visions of rapture; but in shame, suffering, and death in service of others. By the work of God's Word and the illumination of the Holy Spirit, this man was the first to see this glory with his own eyes. And he understood that the placard above Jesus' head proclaimed the truth: this really is the King of the Jews; but his kingdom is not of this world – it's of the next. The only question that remained was, "Was this glorious love – was this kingdom – for someone like me too?"

He becomes aware that the mocking of Jesus has changed subject. Now they're sneering about how he saved others, but cannot save himself. That's when he hears the familiar voice of his companion in crime: "Yes, Jesus, save yourself – and us too while you're at it!" The words are spoken in contempt. There's no conviction in them. It occurs to the now believing criminal that by not saving himself, Jesus is saving them. "Leave him alone! We're getting what we deserve here; but this man is innocent. He's done nothing wrong." Jesus turns

his face toward him. Their eyes meet. He tries to read the expression on Jesus' face; but all he sees is the agony of the crushing weight of sin that he bears. He asks hesitantly, as if it's too much to hope for, "Remember *me*, Jesus, when you come into your kingdom?" There's a pause ... a moment of panic when he expects to hear richly deserved words of rejection. But to his amazement and relief he hears the perfect word of absolution, spoken from the cross itself: "Amen. Amen, I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Three men, three crosses. On the centermost hangs a viciously beaten and bloody man whose head is crowned in thorns. On the other two hang the all the rest of humanity: criminals full of sin who deserve to die in time and to be damned to hell in eternity. One side is full of pride and contempt, imagining that this world has treated them unjustly. The other side admits the truth: that we're only getting what we deserve. One side seeks to be saved "as is" in this life, preserving the sin nature intact. The other side seeks to be saved through death, killing the sin nature once and for all. One side looks at the man in the center and sees an object of scorn, someone ridiculous, a silly fool. The other side looks at him and by grace through faith sees God's love revealed in his Son, the world's Savior and King. One side will die in despair. The other side will die in peace, hope, and joy. One side will see hell. The other side will see the Savior's welcoming face in paradise.

Therefore let us pray: O Lord, have mercy upon us. Show us our sins. Bring us to repentance. Reveal to us the glory of the cross. Keep us in true faith. And remember us in your kingdom. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!